“THEY ARE THE SAME OLD WOLVES”

Nestor Makhno, the Bolshevik Experiment,
and the Revolutionary Who Proved Centralization Was a Choice

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ABSTRACT

In June 1918, a twenty-nine-year-old Ukrainian peasant named Nestor Makhno sat across from Vladimir Lenin in the Kremlin. Lenin told him the peasants of southern Ukraine were “infected with anarchism.” Makhno went home and built an army. Between 1918 and 1921, the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine fought in the same civil war, against the same enemies, under the same conditions as the Bolsheviks—and did so without building a secret police, without confiscating grain at gunpoint, without executing deserters, and without appointing political commissars. Makhno’s movement is the control group of the Russian Revolution. Its existence strips away the Bolshevik defense of necessity and reveals the construction of the Soviet police state for what it was: a choice that served the consolidation of party power. Makhno warned in 1919 that the commissars were the new aristocrats, the Cheka the new Okhrana, and the “dictatorship of the proletariat” a dictatorship *over* the proletariat. He was dismissed as a bandit. Then Stalin proved him right on every count. This paper examines Makhno through the framework of Elite Darwinism, showing how the

structural dynamics of institutional capture operate within revolutionary movements—and how the warnings of those who see the pattern clearly are systematically delegitimized by those engaged in the capture itself.

I. THE MEETING

The Kremlin in June 1918 was still informal enough that a self-described "semi-literate peasant" could wander its corridors and meet the men running the revolution. Nestor Makhno had come to Moscow looking for living quarters and ideological clarity. He found both, though the clarity was not the kind the Bolsheviks intended to provide.

Makhno was twenty-nine years old. He had spent the previous nine years in Butyrki Prison, sentenced to death at nineteen for anarchist activities—the sentence commuted to life at hard labor because of his youth. In prison he had educated himself under the guidance of Peter Arshinov, an older anarchist who taught him theory, history, mathematics, and the conviction that ordinary people could govern themselves without masters. When the February Revolution of 1917 opened the prison doors, Makhno went straight home to Huliaipole, a large peasant village in southern Ukraine, and began organizing communes and free soviets along anarchist principles.

Now, a year later, he sat across from Lenin. Yakov Sverdlov, chairman of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, had arranged the meeting because he thought Lenin would want to hear "the real feelings of peasants" in Ukraine. Lenin received Makhno warmly, clasping his shoulder, telling his secretary they were not to be disturbed for one hour. Then he began asking questions.

Lenin wanted to know what the Ukrainian peasants made of the Bolshevik slogan "All power to the local Soviets." Makhno replied that they took it literally—they assumed it meant complete local control over all affairs affecting them, without party supervision. He added that this was the correct interpretation.

Lenin's response was revealing. "In this case," he said, "the peasants from your area are infected with anarchism."

Makhno asked: "Do you think that is bad?"

Lenin replied carefully: "I did not say that. On the contrary, it may be to the good, for it would speed up the victory of communism over capital and its authority." But he went on to observe that mere peasant enthusiasm would burn itself out—that it could not survive serious blows from the counterrevolution. The anarchist approach, however admirable in spirit, was not realistic.

Makhno responded that "a leader should not be a pessimist or a sceptic."

This exchange, recorded in Makhno's memoirs years later from Parisian exile, captures something more than a philosophical disagreement between two revolutionaries. It captures the moment where two fundamentally different theories of power faced each

other across a desk in the Kremlin—and where the man with the army dismissed the man with the argument, not by refuting it, but by diagnosing it as disease.

Infected with anarchism. Not "inspired by" or "committed to"—*infected.* The framing matters. It reduces a political philosophy to a pathology, the self-organization of millions of peasants to a symptom requiring treatment. And the implied treatment was clear enough: the party would provide the cure.

The Bolsheviks gave Makhno a forged passport identifying him as a schoolteacher, and he made his way back to Ukraine. They also tried to recruit him as an agent. He refused. When he arrived in Huliaipole, he found his mother's house burned to the ground and his older brother—a war invalid—murdered by reactionary forces. He picked up where he had left off, organizing peasants and fighting occupiers, this time with nine years of prison education and a clear understanding of what the Bolsheviks intended for Ukraine.

Within a year, he would command one of the most effective military forces in the Russian Civil War. Within three years, he would be proven right about everything he tried to tell Lenin in that room.

II. THE CONTROL GROUP

The standard defense of Bolshevik centralization runs like this: the Civil War required it. Foreign intervention demanded it. With fourteen armies invading Russia, with famine spreading, with the White Army threatening Moscow itself, there was no alternative to emergency measures—secret police, forced grain requisitioning, one-party rule, suppression of dissent. These were regrettable necessities forced by impossible circumstances. Lenin and Trotsky did not *want* to build a police state. They *had* to.

Nestor Makhno's existence demolishes this argument.

Between 1918 and 1921, the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine fought in the same civil war, against the same enemies, under the same conditions of foreign intervention, famine, and existential threat. At its peak the movement controlled territory inhabited by roughly seven million people across southern Ukraine. The army numbered between thirty and forty thousand, equipped with artillery, machine guns, and the famous tachankas—horse-drawn carts mounted with machine guns that gave Makhno's cavalry devastating mobile firepower.

The Makhnovists faced General Denikin's White Army, Austro-Hungarian occupation forces, Ukrainian nationalist militias under Petliura, and—repeatedly—the Red Army itself. They fought on multiple fronts simultaneously, often while retreating across hundreds of kilometers of open steppe with thousands of civilian refugees trailing

behind them. They suffered the same typhus epidemics that ravaged all armies in the conflict. They faced the same ammunition shortages, the same supply crises, the same desperate conditions that the Bolsheviks cited to justify every expansion of state power.

And they organized their war effort without replicating any of the structures the Bolsheviks claimed were necessary.

What the Makhnovists Did Not Build

No secret police. The Bolsheviks established the Cheka in December 1917, less than two months after seizing power, and granted it authority to arrest, interrogate, and execute without trial. The Makhnovists never created an equivalent institution. Justice was handled through elected councils and public proceedings. There was no permanent apparatus of surveillance and terror accountable only to a party leadership.

No forced grain requisitioning. The Bolshevik policy of *prodrazvyorstka*—armed detachments seizing grain from peasants at gunpoint—was one of the revolution's most hated features and a primary driver of peasant revolt across Russia. The Makhnovists organized agricultural production through voluntary communes on expropriated estates and redistributed land to peasants. Decisions about production and distribution were made at regional congresses of workers and peasants, not imposed from above by party functionaries.

No political commissars. The Red Army attached political commissars to every military unit, tasked with ensuring ideological conformity and reporting on commanders. The Makhnovist army elected its officers, who could be recalled by their units. Discipline was maintained through conviction and peer accountability rather than through an apparatus of political surveillance.

No executions for desertion. The Red Army executed deserters. The Makhnovist army was voluntary. Men came because they believed in the cause and left when they chose. This produced its own problems—fluctuating force levels, difficulty maintaining formation discipline—but it also produced something the Red Army could never match: an army that fought because it wanted to, not because it feared its own officers more than the enemy.

No one-party monopoly. The Makhnovists tolerated all political parties and organizations in their territory. When they took the city of Katerynoslav (now Dnipro) in November 1919, they issued a proclamation that explicitly guaranteed freedom of speech, press, and assembly to all political tendencies—while warning that any attempt to impose a political authority over the working people would not be permitted. The distinction was precise: you could advocate for any idea, but you could not seize a monopoly on power.

What the Makhnovists Did Build

A military force that worked. The Makhnovist army did not merely survive—it achieved some of the most consequential victories of the entire Civil War. The decisive engagement came at Peregonovka on September 26, 1919, after four months and six hundred kilometers of grueling westward retreat under relentless pressure from Denikin's Volunteer Army.

Denikin's forces were at their peak. His armies had taken Kharkov, Kiev, Odessa. His advance units were approaching Orel, less than two hundred kilometers from Moscow. The Bolsheviks were preparing to evacuate their government. Lenin himself seemed to accept the possibility that the revolution might fall.

On the evening of September 25th, the Makhnovist forces—exhausted, outnumbered, with their backs against hostile territory—suddenly reversed direction and marched east, straight into the main body of Denikin's army. The battle began at three in the morning. By nine, the insurgents were being pushed back to the outskirts of the village. Then Makhno himself appeared on the enemy's flank, having led his cavalry escort through a deep ravine in the darkness. He charged the White positions at full gallop with sabres drawn. The flank collapsed. The rout became total.

Within ten days, the Makhnovists had recaptured their capital at Huliaipole and occupied a vast territory including the cities of Kryvyi Rih, Nikopol, Melitopol, Oleksandrivsk, Berdiansk, and Mariupol. They seized control of the regional rail network and blocked the Allied supply ports on the southern coast. Cut off from their supply lines, Denikin's advance on Moscow stalled and then reversed. White officers at Peregonovka reportedly said: "It's over."

Peter Arshinov, who witnessed the battle, wrote that "the honor of having annihilated the Denikinist counter-revolution in the autumn of 1919 belongs almost entirely to the Makhnovists." Even the Bolshevik member of the Revolutionary Military Council, Grigory Ordzhonikidze, acknowledged the reality in a letter to Lenin: "Denikin certainly broke his neck on a Ukrainian peasant."

This was not a minor guerrilla action. This was a volunteer army, organized on anarchist principles, without political commissars or secret police or forced conscription, defeating the most serious military threat the Russian Revolution faced—and doing so at the precise moment when the Bolshevik Red Army could not.

Why the Control Group Matters

In any experiment, the control group exists to isolate the variable being tested. The Bolsheviks claimed that state centralization was necessary for survival in civil war conditions. Makhno held the conditions constant—same war, same enemies, same

famine, same foreign intervention—and removed the variable. His movement survived for three years without a state apparatus, and was ultimately destroyed not by the Whites but by the Bolsheviks themselves, who turned the full force of the Red Army against the Makhnovists only after the common enemies had been defeated.

Because Makhno existed, we know that the police state was a choice. The Cheka was not an emergency measure—it was a foundation. Grain requisitioning was not survival—it was control. One-party rule was not wartime necessity—it was the point.

III. THE QUESTION OF LENIN

The hardest question in the history of the Russian Revolution is not whether Stalin was a monster. That's straightforward. The hard question is Lenin.

Did Vladimir Lenin genuinely believe that centralized party dictatorship was the necessary path to workers' liberation—that the terrible measures were temporary, that the state would eventually wither away, that the suffering was justified by the utopia it would produce? Or did he understand, at some level, that the apparatus he was building would become an end in itself—that the party's monopoly on power would reproduce the very class structure it claimed to abolish?

The honest answer is that we cannot know. And the framework of Elite Darwinism—the theory that positions of authority are systematically captured by strategic operators regardless of the original intent behind their creation—suggests that the answer may not matter as much as we think.

Elite Darwinism identifies three types of operators in any institutional hierarchy. There are the purely sincere, who refuse to compromise principles for advancement and systematically lose as a result. There are the cynical operators, who use institutional positions instrumentally for personal power. And between them, there are the sincere strategists—people who genuinely believe in the mission but are also willing to act strategically to advance it, to build coalitions, to compromise when necessary, to use political skill in service of their ideals.

Lenin may have been a sincere strategist who genuinely believed that party dictatorship was the fastest route to workers' liberation—that the ends justified the means, that the temporary horrors of the Cheka and the grain requisitions and the suppression of rival socialist parties were the birth pangs of a new world. Many intelligent, well-read people have believed exactly this. The conviction that a vanguard party must seize and hold power *for* the working class, because the working class cannot yet govern itself, is not an absurd position. It is a coherent theory. It happens to be wrong—Makhno proved it wrong in real time—but sincerely holding a wrong theory is not the same as cynical manipulation.

Alternatively, Lenin may have been something closer to a cynical operator who recognized early that "dictatorship of the proletariat" was a formula for party supremacy and pursued it knowingly. His treatment of rival socialist parties—the Mensheviks, the Socialist Revolutionaries, the anarchists—was ruthless from the start, well before the Civil War provided a justification. The suppression of the Moscow anarchists in April 1918 occurred months before any serious White Army threat materialized. Lenin's explanation was that the anarchists were "hiding well-known bandits"—a framing that, whether true or not, conveniently reduced political rivals to criminals.

The truth is probably neither pure type but some mixture that shifted over time. What matters for the analysis is this: **the structural outcome was identical regardless of Lenin's internal convictions.** Whether he built the Cheka because he genuinely believed it was necessary for the revolution or because he understood it was necessary for party power, the Cheka existed either way. Whether he suppressed the anarchists out of sincere conviction that decentralization would fail or out of recognition that it threatened his party's monopoly, the anarchists were suppressed either way. Whether the grain requisitions were a desperate emergency measure or a deliberate tool of control, the peasants starved either way.

This is the central insight of structural analysis: the sincerity of the operator does not alter the function of the institution. A secret police force with unlimited power to arrest and execute produces terror whether its creator believes the terror serves liberation or knows it serves domination. The peasant being robbed at gunpoint experiences no material difference between a commissar who sincerely believes he's building utopia and one who knows he's consolidating a new ruling class.

Makhno understood this. His critique was never primarily about Lenin's personal sincerity or lack thereof. It was about the *structures*—the Cheka, the party monopoly, the commissar system, the centralized command economy—and what those structures would inevitably produce regardless of anyone's intentions. When he called the Bolshevik leaders "the same old wolves in sheep's clothing," he was not necessarily claiming they were all cynics. He was claiming that the structures they were building would function the same way the old structures had functioned, because *structures determine outcomes regardless of the ideology that justifies them*.

IV. THE WOLVES AND THE SHEEP'S CLOTHING

Makhno's most enduring intellectual contribution was his identification of what he called *institutional rebranding*—the practice of changing labels and rhetoric while preserving the fundamental structure of elite extraction.

> *"The State-socialists of these days are nothing more than the same old masters. The only difference is that formerly, the masters were called*

> *'nobles' or 'landowners' or 'capitalists,' while now they are called 'workers' and peasants' leaders' or 'commissars.' But in reality, they are the same old wolves in sheep's clothing."* — Makhno, The Struggle Against the State

This was not abstract theorizing. Makhno was describing concrete behavior he had observed in Ukrainian villages occupied by Bolshevik forces. Commissars arrived and commandeered the best housing—exactly as Tsarist officials had done before them. Party functionaries requisitioned grain at gunpoint—exactly as the old tax collectors had. Cheka agents arrested and executed people without trial—exactly as the Okhrana, the Tsar's secret police, had done for generations. Bolshevik authorities crushed workers' strikes—exactly as Tsarist police had crushed them.

The function was identical. An armed official confiscating a peasant's grain performs the same structural role whether he wears a Tsarist uniform or carries a party card. The institutional branding changes—the Okhrana becomes the Cheka, the nobility becomes the commissariat, the divine right of kings becomes the dictatorship of the proletariat—but the relationship between the armed man and the unarmed farmer remains exactly the same.

Makhno coined the term ***Commissar-ocracy*** (*Komissaroderzhavie*) to name what he was watching emerge. It was not metaphor. It was structural analysis, a description of a new ruling class forming in real time with characteristics identical to the old aristocracy: material privileges unavailable to workers, political monopoly enforced by violence, and—increasingly—hereditary advantage as commissars' children gained preferential access to education and advancement.

By 1926, writing from exile in Paris, Makhno noted that the Bolsheviks had abandoned even the pretense of equality. At the 14th Congress of the Russian Communist Party, Mikhail Kalinin had argued openly: "Can we talk to peasants about equality? No, that is out of the question, for in that case, they would set about demanding the same rights as workers, which would be in complete contradiction with the dictatorship of the proletariat."

Makhno's response was devastating: "It was under the banner of equality that they operated during the great Russian revolution… after eight years of ruling over the lives and liberties of the toilers… the Bolshevik czars sought to persuade the toilers… that if they have persecuted, left to rot in prison or deported and murdered their political enemies, this has been done exclusively in the name of the revolution."

The rebranding was complete. Aristocrats had become commissars. The Okhrana had become the Cheka. Inequality was repackaged as revolutionary necessity. Oppression was justified as the path to liberation. And the peasant, who had traded one set of

masters for another, understood the situation with a clarity that eluded the theoreticians: the wolves had changed their clothing, but they were still wolves.

V. THE CANCER EATING THE REVOLUTION

Of all the institutions Makhno identified as tools of elite consolidation, the Cheka occupied the center of his analysis. In his 1920 Appeal to the Red Army, he wrote:

> *"Soviet power has become a power of police and institutions. It proclaims the right of the police to control the people. The Cheka is the shame of the revolution. It is the cancer that is eating the revolution from within."*

The metaphor of cancer was precise. Cancer does not attack from outside—it is the body's own cells, reproducing without constraint, consuming the organism that produced them. The Cheka was not an external threat to the revolution. It was the revolution's own creation, an institution born from the Bolsheviks' conviction that the revolution required an armed force accountable only to the party, with unlimited authority to arrest, interrogate, torture, and execute.

The parallel with the Okhrana was not subtle. The Tsarist secret police had arrested political opponents without trial, used torture to extract confessions, exiled dissidents to Siberia, and created a climate of fear to suppress resistance. The Cheka did exactly the same things, to the same kinds of people—workers, peasants, intellectuals who opposed authority—using the same methods, justified with different rhetoric. The Okhrana protected the Tsar's power by terrorizing opposition. The Cheka protected the Party's power by terrorizing opposition. The structure and function were identical. Only the claimed beneficiaries changed.

Makhno understood that this institution created a new elite class: the Chekists. They had better food, better housing, immunity from arrest by other agencies. They had the power to arrest anyone. They were accountable only to the party leadership. They were, in every functional sense, the new aristocracy's Praetorian Guard—an armed force whose primary purpose was not to protect the people from enemies but to protect the regime from the people.

The trajectory Makhno predicted in 1920 unfolded with mechanical precision:

The Cheka (1917–1922) established the institutional foundation. The OGPU (1922–1934) expanded its powers and built the first labor camps. The NKVD (1934–1946) conducted the Great Purge, executed hundreds of thousands, and constructed the GULAG system that would hold 1.6 million prisoners by 1940. The KGB (1954–1991) perfected totalitarian surveillance and control for nearly four decades.

By 1937, the NKVD was executing approximately one thousand people per day. The institution Makhno had identified as cancer in 1920 had become the dominant organ of the Soviet body. The secret police did not protect the revolution—it consumed it, eventually executing the very Bolsheviks who had created it.

VI. THE LINGUISTIC TRICK

Makhno's sharpest intellectual weapon was his ability to expose the gap between the Bolsheviks' language and their practice. Nowhere was this gap wider than in the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat."

From the 1919 Manifesto of the Makhnovists:

> *"The 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is in fact the dictatorship of the Social-Democratic party over the proletariat. The Bolsheviks have not liberated the workers; they have merely changed the executioners."*

The Bolshevik claim rested on a syllogism: the party represents the proletariat's objective interests; therefore party dictatorship equals proletariat dictatorship; therefore party power equals proletariat power. The structural reality was the inverse: the party was a small elite of intellectuals and bureaucrats; most proletarians were not party members; and the party suppressed workers who disagreed with it. Party dictatorship was therefore dictatorship *over* the proletariat, not *of* it.

What makes this critique so powerful is that the Bolsheviks themselves eventually admitted the reality Makhno had identified. By March 1919, Lenin acknowledged that the soviets had ceased to be organs of government *by* the working people and were now organs of government *for* the working people, run by the "advanced section of the proletariat"—meaning the party. Trotsky wrote in 1920 that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" was "in essence the dictatorship of its vanguard." Bukharin said the same.

The admission was explicit: party dictatorship, not worker self-governance. But it was framed as revolutionary realism, not as vindication of Makhno's critique. When Makhno said in 1919 that the dictatorship of the proletariat was a dictatorship over the proletariat, he was dismissed as naive. When Lenin said the same thing in different words the same year, it was profound Marxist theory. Same observation. Opposite legitimacy.

By 1921, the evidence was undeniable. Workers in Petrograd struck for better food rations—the Cheka suppressed them. Sailors at Kronstadt, the revolutionary heroes who had helped the Bolsheviks seize power in 1917, demanded free elections to soviets, freedom of speech, release of political prisoners, and an end to the Bolshevik party monopoly. These were not counterrevolutionary demands. They were demands for the

workers' democracy the Bolsheviks had promised. The response was a military assault personally commanded by Trotsky. Thousands were killed. Survivors were executed or sent to camps.

The pattern confirmed everything Makhno had said: when workers tried to exercise the power that was supposedly theirs, the "dictatorship of the proletariat" crushed them.

VII. USE, BETRAY, REPEAT

The Bolshevik relationship with the Makhnovists followed a pattern so consistent it functions as a structural law: ally when threatened, betray when safe. It happened three times.

First Alliance, First Betrayal (1919)

In early 1919, with Denikin's White Army threatening from the south, the Bolsheviks signed a pact for joint military action with Makhno. His forces were formally incorporated into the Red Army as the Third Trans-Dnieper Brigade. The Bolsheviks praised him as a revolutionary hero.

While the alliance was still active, Trotsky sent Cheka agents to assassinate Makhno. They were caught by Makhnovist counterintelligence and executed. Simultaneously, Trotsky ordered Red Army troops to dissolve the agricultural communes and free soviets the Makhnovists had established. On June 8, 1919, Makhno and his closest supporters were declared outlaws—while still ostensibly fighting on the same side.

Makhno left the Red Army and began fighting on two fronts: against the Whites and the Reds simultaneously. It was during this period, fighting alone, that his forces grew to thirty-five thousand and achieved the decisive victory at Peregonovka that broke Denikin's advance on Moscow.

Second Alliance, Second Betrayal (1920)

After Denikin's defeat, Trotsky outlawed the Makhnovists again and ordered the Red Army to destroy them. Eight months of bitter fighting followed. Then Baron Wrangel, Denikin's successor, launched a major offensive from Crimea in the autumn of 1920, and the Bolsheviks once again needed Makhno's forces.

This time, a formal political and military agreement was signed. The Bolsheviks promised to release all anarchist prisoners, guarantee freedom of speech and press for anarchists, and recognize the Makhnovists' autonomous status. In return, Makhno would commit his cavalry—about two thousand riders—to the assault on Wrangel's positions in Crimea.

Makhno, despite his experience of the first betrayal, put the decision to a vote among his troops. They narrowly voted to accept the alliance. He later called it a "grave error."

His aide Grigory Vasilevsky understood the situation perfectly. When word arrived that the Makhnovist commander Simon Karetnik was marching on Simferopol after helping defeat Wrangel in Crimea, Vasilevsky said: "This is the end of the agreement. I wager that in a week the Bolsheviks will be on our backs."

He was off by one day.

On November 25, 1920—less than two weeks after the final victory over Wrangel—Makhno's commanders in Crimea were summoned to a "planning conference." It was a trap. They were arrested and executed immediately. The same day, Trotsky ordered an attack on Makhno's headquarters in Huliaipole. Most of his staff were captured and shot. Anarchist organizations across Ukraine were destroyed. All anarchist prisoners who had been released under the alliance agreement were rearrested.

Makhno himself escaped with a remnant of his army. He spent nearly a year wandering across Ukraine, fighting a losing guerrilla war against overwhelming Red Army forces, suffering from wounds that never properly healed. In August 1921, exhausted and broken, he crossed the Dniester River into Romania.

The Pattern as Structure

The cycle—alliance, usage, liquidation—was not unique to the Makhnovists. It became standard Bolshevik operating procedure:

The Left Socialist Revolutionaries allied with the Bolsheviks in the first months after October 1917. By 1922 they were suppressed. The Mensheviks, fellow Marxists, were hunted and eliminated. The Kronstadt sailors, heroes of 1917, were massacred in 1921. And ultimately the Old Bolsheviks themselves—the men and women who had made the revolution—were purged in the 1930s by the system they had built.

Stalin did not invent this pattern. Lenin and Trotsky established it with their treatment of Makhno and other socialist allies. Stalin simply applied it to the Bolsheviks themselves. The wolves ate each other.

VIII. THE DELEGITIMIZATION OF ACCURATE WARNINGS

The Bolshevik response to Makhno's critique was never to engage his arguments. It was to delegitimize the messenger. This is a structural feature of institutional capture: those engaged in the capture must reframe accurate diagnosis as self-interest, principle as naivety, and warning as threat.

Lenin called Makhno's peasants "infected with anarchism"—reducing a political philosophy to pathology. When questioned about suppressing Moscow anarchists, Lenin said it was necessary because they were "hiding well-known bandits." The framing reduced political rivals to criminals, making suppression a matter of law enforcement rather than political repression.

Trotsky was more explicit. He called Makhno a "bandit" and accused him of seizing trains meant for factories, tearing up railroad tracks, and shooting Communists. "Of course," Trotsky wrote with deliberate sarcasm, "Makhno called this the anarchist struggle with the state." The sarcasm did its intended work: it reframed principled opposition to state power as a cover for criminality.

The most strategically important label was "kulak defender." The Bolsheviks repeatedly characterized the Makhnovist movement as representing wealthy peasants rather than the working class. This was crucial: if Makhno represented kulaks, his opposition was mere class interest, and suppressing him became class struggle rather than the suppression of fellow revolutionaries. His critique of Bolshevik elite formation could be dismissed as bourgeois propaganda.

The evidence contradicted this entirely. The Makhnovist program called for land redistribution to poor peasants, establishment of communes, expropriation of the wealthy—the precise opposite of kulak interests. But accuracy was irrelevant. The label served its function: delegitimizing the critique so the structural analysis could be ignored.

The pattern is recognizable because it repeats wherever institutional capture is challenged:

The warning "you're creating a new ruling class" is answered with "you're protecting your own privilege." The warning "you're suppressing workers in workers' name" is answered with "you're a bandit using revolutionary rhetoric." The warning "your secret police is destroying the revolution" is answered with "you're harboring counterrevolutionaries."

The reframing accomplishes its purpose: principled resistance is made to look like its opposite, and the structural critique is never addressed on its merits.

IX. THE VINDICATION

Nestor Makhno died on July 25, 1934, in a Paris hospital, at the age of forty-five. Tuberculosis, compounded by old war wounds that had never healed properly. He had spent his last thirteen years in poverty, working menial jobs, writing memoirs and anarchist articles that sold poorly, suffering from a shattered ankle that left him with a

permanent limp. He could have sought accommodation with Soviet authorities, recanted his anarchism, and possibly been allowed to return to Ukraine. Many exiled revolutionaries made such bargains. Makhno refused. In 1931 he was still writing open letters to Spanish anarchists warning them to "beware Bolshevik perfidy and treachery."

He died two years before the event that proved him right beyond any possible dispute.

The Great Purge

Between 1936 and 1938, Stalin executed the very Bolsheviks who had betrayed and dismissed Makhno. Of 1,966 delegates to the 17th Party Congress in 1934—the "Congress of Victors"—1,108 were arrested and most executed. Of 139 Central Committee members elected at that congress, 98 were shot. Three of five marshals of the Soviet Union were executed. Thirteen of fifteen army commanders were executed. Approximately forty percent of all Red Army officers were purged.

The individuals prove the point. Zinoviev, who helped suppress Makhno, was executed in 1936 after confessing to being a "fascist agent." Kamenev, who helped suppress Makhno, was executed the same year after confessing to "terrorism." Bukharin, who theorized the dictatorship of the vanguard, was executed in 1938 after confessing to "wrecking."

The Old Bolsheviks who had called Makhno a counterrevolutionary bandit were themselves executed as counterrevolutionary bandits by the system they built. The irony is total. They dismissed Makhno's warnings about elite capture, then became victims of that capture.

The Commissar-ocracy Realized

What Makhno called the "Commissar-ocracy" in 1919 became the Soviet *nomenklatura* system: a hereditary ruling class with special stores selling goods unavailable to workers, country dachas while workers lived in communal apartments, preferential access to education and healthcare, foreign travel and luxury goods denied to the masses. By the 1970s, Soviet workers were asking bitterly: "We overthrew the nobles—why do we have new nobles called commissars?"

This was exactly what Makhno had written in 1919: "The only difference is that formerly, the masters were called 'nobles'… while now they are called 'commissars.' But in reality, they are the same old wolves."

The Cancer Metastasized

The Cheka that Makhno called "the cancer eating the revolution from within" metastasized through four institutional renamings—Cheka to OGPU to NKVD to

KGB—while its function remained constant: protecting the party's power by terrorizing opposition. By 1937, the NKVD was executing approximately one thousand people per day. The GULAG system held 1.6 million prisoners by 1940, with hundreds of thousands dying annually. Total deaths under Stalin from state terror alone are estimated at six to nine million.

The institution Makhno identified as cancerous in 1920 had consumed the body it grew from. The secret police executed more people in weeks than the Tsarist regime had executed in decades. The revolution had not merely failed. It had produced something worse than what it replaced—not because revolution is impossible, but because the specific structures the Bolsheviks chose to build were structures of domination regardless of the ideology that justified them.

* * *

History vindicated Makhno on every count. The commissars became the new aristocrats. The Cheka became the GULAG state. The dictatorship of the proletariat became a dictatorship over the proletariat with such totality that Tsarism seemed mild by comparison. And the Bolsheviks who dismissed Makhno's warnings were consumed by the very machinery they had built to consume him.

X. THE EXPERIMENT AND ITS LESSON

The Russian Revolution was, among other things, an experiment in political organization conducted under conditions of extreme pressure. It tested two hypotheses simultaneously.

The Bolshevik hypothesis held that centralized party dictatorship, enforced by secret police and supported by forced extraction from the peasantry, was the necessary instrument of workers' liberation. The terrible measures were temporary. The state would wither away. The suffering would be justified by the result.

The Makhnovist hypothesis held that workers and peasants could organize their own defense and governance without a party monopoly, without secret police, without forced extraction—that the "temporary" measures would become permanent because the structures created to implement them would develop their own logic and their own beneficiaries, producing a new ruling class indistinguishable in function from the old one.

History ran both experiments. The Bolshevik experiment produced Stalin, the GULAG, and the *nomenklatura*. The Makhnovist experiment was destroyed by the Bolsheviks before it could fully develop—which is itself a data point. The one alternative that might have demonstrated a different path was liquidated not by the counterrevolution but by

the revolution itself, not because it failed militarily but because it succeeded in ways that threatened the party's monopoly on power.

The lesson is not that Makhno's anarchism was a perfect system. Three years of civil war conditions are not sufficient to prove that a stateless society can function at scale over the long term. The Makhnovist movement had real problems—difficulty maintaining territorial control, administrative weakness, inconsistent treatment of prisoners, the inherent fragility of voluntary military organization. These are fair criticisms.

But the lesson of the control group does not require perfection. It requires only that an alternative existed—that the same war could be fought and won without the apparatus of terror. And it was. Makhno fought Denikin's army without a Cheka. He organized agricultural production without armed requisition squads. He maintained military effectiveness without political commissars. He proved, in real time and under fire, that the Bolshevik justification of necessity was false.

The deeper lesson connects to the framework of Elite Darwinism: the structural dynamics of institutional capture operate regardless of the ideology justifying the institution. A hierarchical state with a secret police force produces oppression whether the ruling party claims to represent God, the nation, or the working class. The competitive selection pressures that fill positions of authority with strategic operators work the same way in a communist party as in a medieval church or a corporate boardroom. The sincere founder's intentions are consumed by the institutional logic he creates.

Whether Lenin was a sincere strategist who believed every terrible measure was necessary for utopia, or a cynical operator who recognized that "dictatorship of the proletariat" was a formula for party supremacy, or—most likely—some shifting mixture of both, the structural outcome was the same. The apparatus of the police state, once built, followed its own logic. The Cheka did not care about Lenin's intentions. It cared about its own institutional survival and expansion. The party bureaucracy did not care about Marx's theories. It cared about its own privileges. The machinery of domination, once constructed, serves whoever operates it—and the operators are selected not for their ideological purity but for their willingness to use the machinery.

Makhno saw this. He said it clearly, repeatedly, and at the cost of everything. He was called a bandit, driven into exile, and died in poverty at forty-five. His warnings were dismissed as naive, his movement written out of history by Soviet and Western historians alike.

Then history proved him right with a precision that borders on cruelty: every prediction confirmed, every warning vindicated, every dismissed analysis validated by the blood of millions.

The wolves changed their clothing. But they were still wolves. Makhno knew it, said it, and paid for saying it. The commissars who dismissed him paid more—consumed by the same machinery they had used to consume him.

The pattern does not end with the Soviet Union. Wherever institutions consolidate authority, wherever a party or class claims to act *for* the people while acting *over* them, wherever a secret police or surveillance apparatus is justified as temporary and necessary, wherever revolutionary language is used to rebrand the same old structures of extraction—the wolves are putting on new clothing. Makhno's warning remains operational.

The control group has spoken. The question is whether anyone is listening.

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